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Archives—A Primer for the 21st Century

From the days of ancient Mesopotamia, archivists have served as society's keepers of proof. Archivists manage the authentic by-products of human actions—records. As humans, we produce records at every stage of our lives as proof of our actions—from birth certificates to contracts. We also create records as milestones for our memories, leading to the development of diaries, scrapbooks, sketchbooks, photographic albums, personal web pages, and entire genres of commemorative documentation.

In totalitarian societies, records remain closed. In democracies records are essential tools for discovering whether individuals, organizations, and governments are meeting administrative, cultural, ethical, fiscal, and regulatory mandates and guidelines. In the late-20th century, American citizens, stockholders, organizational members, and others insist that public records be available to auditors, educators, historians, journalists, lawyers, and the general public for examination and analysis. The archivist's job has broadened to include becoming a keeper of information as well as evidence.

Archives function as an institution or group's long-term memory by preserving and describing permanently valuable audio-visual, paper textual, and electronic records that contain:

- data (discoveries, facts, and observations)
- information (data collected systematically with purpose and complete context)
- knowledge (valuable information reflecting human insight and understanding)
- wisdom (excellent understanding, appropriate balance and emphasis, and sound judgment)

While it is relatively easy to capture data in databases for short-term sharing, the process of capturing an organization's knowledge for sharing through time has yet to be effectively managed except through oral and administrative histories, cross training, and effective records management. Such "deep knowledge" is rarely modular or easy to transfer.[1] Sadly, information and knowledge torturously acquired by an individual over decades can be lost in a minute through retirement, transfer, or death. In many cases, all that remains is the written records of the individual's thoughts, transactions, and work.

The practice of archives grew out of the disciplines of history and library science, with a focus on establishing and maintaining control, both physical and intellectual, over physical documents. These documents themselves are often the only trace of how and why events happened as they did. Both the building that holds the records and the permanently valuable records themselves are called archives. Visitors from every age, culture, economic background, and nation regularly visit archives.

Why Do Researchers Come to Archives?

Researchers come to archives to:

- discover evidence within the archives' sifted and arranged information in support of an assumption, law suit, or scientific/cultural theory
- explore an event/action/relationship within a sea of related context that provides variant viewpoints
- gather cultural and natural resource data for management purposes including baseline data
- locate illustrations or stories for exhibits, films, publications, teaching, videos, and web sites
- glimpse the authentic past by finding out about their community, ancestors, or a favorite topic
- eavesdrop on the past by listening to the internal dialogues of individuals and groups in their own words in letters, oral and video histories, diaries, and meeting notes[2]

Archives are the legacy we leave to the future, the natural byproducts of our actions, and the raw material of memory.

Why Keep Archives?

At the cusp of the 21st century as we reach for the knowledge-based economy, we keep archives because they are vital to our organizations, culture groups, professions, and perhaps even to our survival as a species. First and foremost, we require the essential information archives contain for accountability, collective memory, management of our organizations and resources, as proof of our authentic past, and as data grist for endless reprocessing in our information management mills. In parks, we need archives to document how the cultural resources and natural ecosystem have changed over time and, in particular, how the hand of man has helped cause these changes.[3]

Beyond information alone, archives serve as important repositories of documents as evidence.

Where Can I Find Help on Keeping Archives?

The Society of American Archivists is the professional organization for individuals wishing to learn more about how to become an archivist or wishing to increase their knowledge of best professional practices. The Society offers courses, publications, activities, and events nationally. Announcements may be found on their web site at: <http://www.archivists.org/>. Contact SAA at 527 South Wells, Street, 5th floor, Chicago, IL 60607; 312-922-0140; fax: 312-347-1452; or email: <info@archivists.org>

The Academy of Certified Archivists is an independent non-profit archival organization established in 1989, which certifies (identifies and provides a basic credential for) professional archivists by examination, educational credentials, and experience. The Academy can be reached at 48 Howard St, Albany, NY 12207; 518-463-8644; fax: 518-463-8656; or on the Web: <http://www.umw.edu/Library/arch/aca/index.htm>.

University Archival Training Programs at the masters and/or doctoral level are offered by over 30 colleges and universities nationally. The Society of American Archivists annually publishes a *Directory of Archival Education*, available on the SAA web site at: <http://www.archivists.org>. Beyond providing staff training, these programs can provide managers with trained archival interns to help with arrangement, description, preservation, research, archival finding aid production, and documentary publication projects.

Regional and Thematic Archival Associations. A recent archival associations directory at <http://sophia.smith.edu/~pnelson/regionals/usa.htm#m> lists over 68 organizations. Most regions have an archival association that meets regularly to discuss the interests of the membership. Associations are good places to meet one's colleagues, take workshops, and tour the other archives in the area. The most active archival associations include:

- Conference of Inter-Mountain Archivists <http://www.lib.utah.edu/cima/>
- Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference <http://www.itd.umd.edu/MARAC/marac-hp.htm>
- Midwest Archives Conference <http://www.uwm.edu./Library/arch/mac/mac/htm>
- National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators <http://www.nagara.org>
- New England Archivists <http://www.lib.umb.edu/newengarch/>
- Northwest Archivists <http://www.orst.eduy/Depart/archives/misc./nwa.html>
- Seattle Area Archivists (206-543-6512)
- Society of California Archivists <http://dlis.gseis.ucla.edu/society_of_california_archivists/>
- Society of Georgia Archivists <http://www.soga.org/>
- Society of Rocky Mountain Archivists (303-866-4602)
- Society of Southwest Archivists <http://lib-01.lib.un.edu/ssa/ssa.htm>

Materials in archives are valuable as legal or historical proof of events such as births, deaths, accidents, and celebrations, as well as proof of activities, such as land purchases, competition results, and work completed. As historical or legal detectives, we need archives to discover and prove what we have, what we did, why we did what we did, and when it all happened. When lawyers and historians ask, "What did he know and when did he know it?" we go to archives to discover the truth. Archives are the ultimate weapon in the battle for accountability.

An archival collection is an accumulation of records, created or assembled by an individual or group. Historians call these records primary sources (original documents). These documents are often associated with individuals, events, organizations, and activities we would remember, from the Gettysburg Address to the Declaration of Independence, from John Muir's journal to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's musings on the Second World War.[4]

Some materials in archives also stand on their own as material culture. These architectural drawings and plans, broadsides, graphic drawings and prints, ephemera, motion picture footage, correspondence on unusual letterhead, photographs, photomechanical and similar items are of high scholarly interest due to their excellence as representative artifacts, part of our world heritage of material culture. Rare items in unusual formats, processes, or genres qualify as having artifactual value.

What Purpose Does an Archives Serve?

Archives serve as a group or organization's memory. The records included in the archives tell us how an individual, group, or organization's goals, resources, and activities changed over time and how they met their responsibilities to those they served.

Archives are an organization's information bank. Like banks, archives:

- hold major investments in information capital that were very skill and labor intensive to produce
- hold resources that increase in value over time, particularly in a knowledge-based economy
- make their resources available to their users for purposes of creating secondary value

Our cultural and scientific certainties of today will not always be valid. When we want to re-examine our conclusions and develop new theories, we will need to go back to our primary data sources, whether textual, electronic, or audiovisual for renewed examination and analysis.[5] Whether we are documenting the human effect on the envi-

ronment, what peoples lived in an area, what led to the development of a particular series of structures, or how a particular artifact was created, the basic data should become part of our organization's archives.

As scientific revolutions take place and our view of our cultural resources and history changes, we can go back to the basic observations and data captured in the organizational records and personal papers in the archives to develop new ways to view our world. The richness and long-term accuracy of future scientific and cultural developments depend upon the long-term storage and accessibility of today's data. This long-term accessibility requires more than simply dumping paper in a drawer; it requires that we actively manage, preserve, and describe this data to facilitate both preservation and access.

Archives capture the knowledge of the staff who shape and enrich our organizations. During our lifetimes of work as archeologists, architects, architectural historians, archivists, curators, educators, historians, historic preservation officers, interpreters, landscape architects, and tribal cultural resource specialists, we develop expertise in hundreds of areas. Our official records and personal papers reflect that expertise in ways that are otherwise uncaptured.

If mankind is the ecosystem's way of studying itself, then archives are the product of what we find out. In our personal papers and official records is the informational legacy that each of us

Where Can I Find Funding for Keeping Archives?

Your long-term goal should be to obtain baseline funding for archives. In the short term, you may need to operate on other sources of funding. Here are a few funding sources, both external and internal (National Park Service). You may draw upon a wide variety of resources when managing your archival collections including:

External (non-NPS) Funding. You may use the following two major categories of funding sources:

Cooperating Association. Work with your cooperating association or non-profit friends group to solicit funds from corporate philanthropic sources or foundations.

Foundations and Corporate Giving. Foundations that fund archival projects throughout the U.S. include:

- Ameritech National Digital Library Competition—funded by Ameritech but managed by the Library of Congress (202-707-1087; email: lc_ameritech @loc.gov; web: <http://lcweb2.log.gov/ammem/award>)
- Nathan Cummings Foundation (212-787-7300)
- Arthur Vining Davis Foundation (904-359-0670)
- Ford Foundation (212-573-5000)
- Henry Luce Foundation (212-489-7700)
- John D. and Katherine T. MacArthur Foundation (312-726-8000) <www.MACFDN.org>
- Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (212-838-8400; <http://www.mellon.org>)
- Pew Charitable Trust (215-575-9050)
- The National Park Foundation (NPF) writes and helps administer grants for NPS staff. Individual projects should be approved by superintendents before contacting the NPF at 1101 17th St, NW, Washington, DC 20036; fax: 202-785-3539; 202-785-4500.

Federal Grant Funding Sources. Guidance on how to proceed with selecting such sources can be found at the Foundation Center. Consider such organizations as the following:

National Endowment for the Humanities Division of Preservation and Access (202-606-8570; email: preservation@neh.gov

Institute of Museum and Library Services (202-606-5226, Web: <http://www.imls.fed.us>);

National Historical Publications and Records Commission (202-501-5600; fax: 202-501-5601; Web <http://www.nara.gov/nara/nhprc/>)

NPS Funding. Beyond park budgets, there are four major NPS internal funding sources available only for NPS archival work. The NPS Museum Management Program of the National Center for Cultural Resources Stewardship and Partnership Programs coordinates the first two funds. The Field Directorate coordinates the latter two funds. Contact your regional or support office curator for further guidence.

Backlog Cataloging funds. Obtain Backlog Cataloging funds to hire temporary staff or to extend temporary staff appointments to survey and catalog NPS materials that were in the park prior to 1987.

Museum Collections Preservation and Protection Program (MCPP) funds. Use MCPP funds to eliminate NPS museum collection storage and security deficiencies that affect NPS archives as reported on the Checklist for Preservation and Protection of Museum Collections.

Cultural Resources Preservation Program (CRPP) funds. In the NPS, use CRPP funds to survey, assess, catalog, arrange, describe, rehouse, and protect and conserve archival collections, particularly projects in the park's Resource Management Plan.

Cultural Cyclic Maintenance Funds. Use these funds to survey, assess, arrange, describe, and conserve NPS archival materials on a greater-than-one-year cycle.

leaves for future generations. Our heirs are not only our children, but also the children of our minds, the generations of professionals who come after us. Whether our knowledge is lost, our contributions forgotten, and our information discarded depends upon how we manage our records during our lifetime.

Archives form part of the fabric of our organizations, as linked to our organization's history as the staff, site, structures, and other resources we cherish. For example: at the NPS, we hold not only Thomas Edison's furnished house and fully equipped laboratory, but also his business records, laboratory research findings, and correspondence. Without the early archival sound recordings, the recording equipment would be diminished in value. Without the laboratory notebooks and records that illustrate how the equipment was used, the laboratory equipment would be less compelling. Taken together the laboratory and home sites, structures, furnishings, equipment, personal library, and the archives provide a complete information ecosystem, a glimpse into the life, work, and mind of an American genius.

How Do Archivists Decide What to Collect?

Before being sent to an archives, records must be scheduled (listed for transfer on a certain date by a records manager) and evaluated (appraised as to their significance to determine if they are permanently valuable). In manuscript repositories it may also be necessary to determine if the records fit the collecting focus (Scope of Collections and mission statement) of the archives.

Legal issues (e.g., copyright, privacy, and publicity restrictions), donor-imposed restrictions (e.g., not available until after the creator's death), management policy restrictions (e.g., restrictions on fragile or physically endangered materials), and cultural restrictions (e.g., restrictions on images of sacred ceremonies or burials when requested by a culture) may affect whether materials are collected and how they are made accessible.[6] Archivists must only collect collections they can afford to responsibly arrange, describe, preserve, and provide access to, whether they are personal and family papers, corporate records, or the organizational records of groups.

How Is an Archives Different from a Library?

An archival collection consists of original, often unpublished, materials accumulated by a single individual, family, group, or organization over time. A collection, such as the Smith Family Papers or the Hawk Project Records, may include letters, photographs, and other items created by their colleagues and given to the Smiths or the Hawk Project. The key organizational concept of "provenance" is used in archives rather than the library concept of "authorship." Provenance suggests that materials with a shared history of creation and/or ownership, such as the Smith Family Papers or Hawk Project Records, each be kept together. The collections have enhanced value as groups of related items that the individual letters or photographs removed from context will lack.

Knowing who created the records and why helps researchers understand what the records will cover and what functions they originally served, as well as indicating that the files are authentic and not tampered with by someone with a special agenda. Archivists keep archival collections in their original order; not rearranged by subject, as they would be in a library. This maintenance of original order is both cheap and efficient, as it allows archivists to use indices and guides already prepared by the collection creator. The original filing order of a collection also serves as valuable physical evidence of the collection creator's actions, relationships, and work patterns. Original order can be used by historians to date undated items, to attribute unsigned documents to likely creators, and for similar purposes. Loss of original order is a significant damage to a collection.

While the many documents in an archival collection have a shared creator or collector, they may also be related by subject matter, document type (e.g., correspondence, photographs), and history of ownership and usage. Archives may also contain personal papers of individuals and families or groups, as well as manuscript collections assembled by collectors on a common theme. Unlike library cataloging, archival collections are not usually described at the item level. Archives have many millions of items, few of which can be speedily and cheaply copied through copy cataloging online as libraries do with duplicates of a book. Since most archival documents are originals, copy-cataloging that duplicates the records of another institution is not a common option.[7]

Archival materials are described in a series of hierarchical levels, each of which may have extensive interrelated details. Important materials worthy of attention may appear at any level.[8] At the top descriptive-level are national bibliographic databases that provide key metadata (descriptions of finding aids and collections) for researchers. Archivists may also provide descriptive abstracts of all collections that their institution holds in a single indexed repository guide, as well as a finding aid for each collection within their repository.

Finding aids are descriptive guides to collections that assist researchers in locating or using archival collections. Finding aids include guides (for example, repository, collection, and subject guides), descriptive inventories, accession registers, card catalogs, special shelf and box lists,

indices, and even software documentation. In the past, archival finding aids varied widely from archives to archives. Recently archivists have begun standardizing the data, nature, and style of finding aids. In the last 20 years, archivists have focused on augmenting traditional finding aids with library-type cataloging at the archival collection level within bibliographic utilities, such as the Research Library Information Network (RLIN) and the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), to facilitate access.

What Is Involved in Keeping Archives?

Essential elements of an archival program are:

Trained Staff, knowledgeable about archival theory, practice, and techniques of preservation, access, and description and your organization's policies and procedures.

Archival Procedural Guidance including

- *Mission Statement,* which indicates your audience, your goals, and your focus.
- *Scope of Collections Statement,* which indicates what manuscript materials you will collect by detailing the eras, locales, groups, activities, events, and other topics to be collected and whether your archives holds your organization's records or they must go to another federal or state repository such as the National Archives.
- *Records Management Program,* which delivers permanently valuable records no longer being actively used by staff offices to the physical control of the archives, while disposing of inactive records of no value.[9]
- *Standard Operating Procedures (SOP)* for appraisal, acquisitions, accessioning, arrangement, description, researcher access, as well as for duplication publication permission requests. An SOP should indicate how you will handle these activities. These procedures indicate how the staff will gain administrative and intellectual control of the archival collections in the form of a manual or workbook.[10]
- *Processing Plan* for collections, which provides a work plan, budget, and job description for arrangement, preservation, and description of the materials.[11]

Cataloged, Arranged, and Described Archival Collection(s) under the administrative, physical, and intellectual control of the archives staff.

Finding Aids (repository guides, box and folder lists, calendars, catalogs, databases, indices, inventories, registers, and similar descriptive systems) that capture information about each archival collection, including information on appraisal, circumstances of creation, ownership, preservation, statistical compilations, as well as interpretation and bibliographic descriptions. Finding aids may be on the Web.

Storage, Work, and Reading Room Space in a secure building with a good environment.

Researchers who are aware that the collections exist, know how to get to them, and are aware of the policies they must follow for access, usage, duplication, and publication.

Without archives, which support an organization's memory and sense of history, an organization or group lacks a systematic understanding of the complex web of underlying causes and effects that have shaped it. Without a sense of history, we lack a sense of who we are, where we are going, and why. Most frequently this handicap manifests itself by a lack of vision; an inability to sort through the complex choices ahead of us based on more than personal preference and the latest management theory. A sense of who we are historically empowers us to move into the future with confidence and integrity.

Notes

1 Diane Vogt-O'Connor. "The Information Ecosystem," *CRM* 21:6 (1998), pp. 3-6.

2 Mary Jo Pugh. "Information Seeking in Organizations and Archives," *CRM* 21:6 (1998), pp. 10-14.

3 Susan Kraft. "The Yellowstone Archives and its Affiliation with NARA," *CRM* 21:6 (1998), pp.27-29.

4 Kellee Blake. "The Stories You Could Tell: Using NARA Regional Resources for Site Interpretation," *CRM* 21:6 (1998), pp. 24-26.

5 Harrison Eiteljorg, II. "Archiving Archeological Data in the Next Millennium," *CRM* 21:6 (1998), 21-23.

6 Melissa Smith Levine. "Electronic Publishing: A Legal and Practical Primer," *CRM* 18:9 (1995), pp. 23-26.

7 Richard Pearce-Moses. "The Information Ecology of Archives," *CRM* 21:6 (1998), pp. 29-33.

8 Mary Jo Pugh. "Information Seeking in Organizations and Archives," *CRM* 21:6 (1998), pp. 10-14.

9 Betsy Chittenden. "Records Management in the National Park Service," *CRM* 21:6 (1998), pp.15-17.

10 In the NPS, the Regional Curators and Support Office Curators maintain files of Standard Operating Procedures or Scopes of Work for archival work.

11 In the NPS, the Regional Curators and Support Office Curators maintain work plans, budgets, and sample contracts for preservation and description of archival materials.

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